

[Elder] S. A.

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*THE STORY OF*  
THE MANSION HOUSE

By ELDER S. A. BURGESS

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Joseph Smith settled in Nauvoo in the spring of 1839. He and his family, consisting of his wife Emma, his sons Joseph and Frederick, and Alexander, and his adopted daughter Julia moved into a log cabin on the present Water Street near the river. This cabin was built by a Captain Hugh White about sixty years before Joseph Smith and the Latter Day Saints became interested in Nauvoo. This house now visited by thousands each year became known after Joseph Smith's passing as the Joseph Smith Homestead.

He lived there about four years, building the frame addition on the north in 1840 to make more room. The Homestead had only two rooms when he bought it, one upstairs and one downstairs. There were several other buildings on this block used by the family in the 1840's. The addition to this building to the west it appears was added by the late Joseph Smith, the son of Joseph Smith, Jr., about 1858. His parents lived with him for a while in Nauvoo and as president of the Latter Day Saints Church he had to entertain a constant stream of guests.

In 1841 he presented a revelation and a plan for building a Nauvoo House. It was to have been a large hotel, with a 120 feet front on two sides, L-shaped, but was never completed in that form above the windows of the second story. Vardis Fisher's statement in "Children of God" that a hundred thousand dollars brick Nauvoo House was completed and used by the Latter Day Saints in Joseph Smith's time in Nauvoo is a mistake.

The unfinished Nauvoo House with the brick walls built up eight or ten feet high on the foundation stood that way after Joseph's

death in Carthage till his children were grown. The original of the Nauvoo House painting by Joseph's son David showing it that way was in Nauvoo last summer and many people saw it at the Lynn Smith home on the Temple Lot. Lynn is a descendant of Joseph through David. The present Nauvoo House much smaller than the original plan was built in 1869 long after Joseph was in the grave and most of the Latter Day Saints were gone from Nauvoo. This is the brick building at the foot of old Main Street at the river's edge in Nauvoo.

The Mansion House at the corner of Main and Water Streets in Nauvoo associated with the name of Joseph Smith, as one of the historic homes of America, was built by him about 1842 and was occupied as a residence by him in 1843. Though all agree it was built in 1842 it seems not to have been entirely finished as a hotel till the summer of 1843. A plan to build a Joseph Smith residence may have been made before that. Historical research has not established yet as far as I can discover who the contractors or carpenters were. Joseph Smith's oldest son known as young Joseph in pioneer times simply says in his Memoirs and in other writings: "My father built the Mansion House in 1842." Some believe that Joseph directed the building work himself, but this does not seem likely in view of his Church duties and other interests.

Where the lumber was secured is not definitely stated. Much lumber for Nauvoo homes of the 1840s was local and supplied by a local mill, as an examination of historic Nauvoo houses still standing will show. Later, with plans for the Nauvoo House with 8000 feet floor space and three or four

stories high, and the Nauvoo Temple with an even larger floor space and considerable greater height and of at least four stories, including the basement, a mill was purchased on the Black River in Wisconsin and some lumber shipped down from there.

But as this purchase was not made till late in 1843, and the Mansion House was completed prior to that, it appears probable that it also was built with native or local lumber. It may be that the Nauvoo Neighbor or other newspapers of the time would give more exact data, but we do not at present have access to that file.

There is nothing to substantiate contention that Dr. Robert Foster, an M. D. mentioned in Section 107:34 of the Book of Doctrine and Covenants (a revelation through Joseph Smith) was the contractor and builder who built the Mansion House. His interesting account of his associations with Joseph Smith published in an 1875 number of The True L. D. S. Herald makes no mention of this, as he otherwise doubtless would have done.

The Mansion House does not seem to have been entirely completed in the form it finally took at the time Joseph and his family moved in. In fact as it was being built suggestions were made that it be enlarged and made into a hotel or boarding house. This was done, an addition being built on the east which consisted of a good sized dining room and kitchen on the first floor. Below this was a basement with a cooking range and cellar for provisions. On the second story of this addition there was a series of bedrooms, six single ones along the north side and four double rooms with connecting halls on the south side. These rooms with the part already built

made the house very large for that period. Yet examined in the light of later years it does not appear to have been so large. The ceilings were not high, rather low than otherwise, especially in this addition.

On October 3, 1843, a banquet was held for two hundred guests to mark the formal opening and dedication of the Mansion House. This was a housewarming as well as a setting aside as a hotel. A sign was then put over the door, "The Nauvoo Mansion," and the place became quite famous for its day. Those were the palmy days of rural hotels in American history. Emma Smith was installed as the landlady and made a trip to St. Louis to procure furniture, bed linen, table napery, dishes, and utensils, in order to equip it as a hotel.

During Mrs. Smith's absence Porter Rockwell who had been released from prison in Jackson county, Missouri, returned to Nauvoo on December 25, 1843. Mr. Rockwell had been held in prison a year, but was acquitted. He was tried during this period before an unfriendly jury for an alleged attack upon the life of ex-Governor Lilburn Boggs of Missouri, but no evidence was brought forward sufficient to convince the jury or the court of his guilt, and Alexander Doniphan stated no such evidence could be found.

Mr. Rockwell at once attempted to open a saloon in the Mansion House. He also made arrangements to erect a building across the street, where he planned to run a barber shop in connection with a saloon. When Mrs. Smith arrived back in Nauvoo from St. Louis she entered very strong objections, that it was highly improper for such a use of any room in a hotel

run by them and that until at once removed she would feel it necessary to remove across the street back to the old homestead, with her children. When the matter was called to Joseph's attention he at once took steps to have the bar removed.

This is quite in accordance with the articles of incorporation for the Nauvoo House. The Nauvoo Hustler for July 18, 1841, refers to this charter, granted February 23, 1841 to the Nauvoo House Association, to be "kept for the accommodation of strangers, travelers and other persons who may resort for rest and refreshment."

It is declared as a perpetual rule of said house, to be observed by all persons who may keep or occupy the same that spirituous liquors of every description are prohibited, and that such liquors shall never be vended as a beverage or introduced into common use in said house."

Though Mr. Rockwell started to build, the building was never completed and no saloon was erected in the vicinity.

The Mansion House thus had the distinction of being almost the only hotel in America at that period where intoxicating liquors were not sold to guests.

We find a note that Ebenezer Robinson ran the Mansion House as a hotel for a time with Joseph Smith retaining for himself and family only three rooms. In any event the rooms for the family were quite separate and distinct from those used for transient visitors and the hotel employees. In fact the building was so erected that the second story of the family part of the building with its sleeping rooms was not quite on the same level with the addition built up on the east.

Open house was kept for visitors at one period, many being church members who considered the head men of the church should entertain them during their stay in Nauvoo, but it was soon seen that this was not feasible. Then a fee was charged for the use of rooms and the hotel idea continued.

Joseph Smith resided in the Mansion House only about a year. He was murdered by an armed mob in Carthage, Illinois, in June of 1844. After this occurrence his widow and children continued to reside in the Mansion House until things became quite uncomfortable late in 1846. Mrs. Smith then rented it, furnishings and all to a man named Van Tuyl. She took her family to Fulton City for the winter, renting a house on the edge of town. The families of Loren Walker, Leslie Knight, and Sevilla Durkin went north with the Smiths.

But shortly after New Years word reached her that Mr. Van Tuyl was planning to leave Nauvoo as soon as the ice was out of the river and that he intended to take most of the Mansion House furnishings with him. She therefore returned over land to Nauvoo and reached the Mansion House the 19th of February, 1847. She was again installed as landlady there. Mr. Van Tuyl got away with several bedsteads, some furniture, some chamber linen, and managed to get out of Nauvoo without paying his rent, but the greater part of the Mansion House furniture was saved.

Mrs. Smith continued to reside in the Mansion House from this time until 1871, using it as her home with the exception of the few months in Fulton City mentioned, from the time of its building until the 1870s. In 1871 she moved into the brick Nauvoo



House by the river which had been completed a few months before. This building still standing in Nauvoo, as we have said, was called the Riverside Mansion in the 1870s. It was built on the southwest corner of the old stone foundation of the Nauvoo House laid in the 1840s. Mrs. Smith had married a man named Major Bidamon in the late 1840s. He was instrumental in building the Riverside Mansion in its reduced form and in their moving into it.

The Homestead had been deeded to young Joseph some years before by his father. He married a Nauvoo girl named Emmeline Griswold, who had at that time no connection with the Latter Day Saints, and engaged in farming near Nauvoo for some time. He studied law about a year in the office of the Hon. William Kellogg in Canton, Illinois, acted as Clerk of the City Council there and worked part time in the postoffice. He was residing on the farm at Nauvoo when E. C. Briggs and Samuel H. Gurley came to urge him to take up church work in the Latter Day Saints' cause, but the final interview took place in the Mansion House. Mr. Smith at that time took a very firm stand that he would not move forward or accept any church responsibility, unless and until he received evidence for himself that convinced him that it was the will of God. That was his decision as delivered in the Mansion House in December, 1856.

But later receiving what he believed to be evidence of his duty, he took his father's place as the head of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, later known, since 1870, as the Reorganized Church.

He carried this work on for

several years in Nauvoo, residing in the Homestead into which he moved in 1858. He served nearly eight years on the school board in Nauvoo, also as justice of the peace, being elected to the latter office by a majority of two to one in spite of the fact that the Latter Day Saints in Nauvoo numbered less than a hundred at that time. After his removal to Plano, Ill., his wife, Emmeline, returned to Nauvoo with their son on a visit where she was baptized by David H. Smith in March of that year (1866.)

After Mr. and Mrs. Bidamon moved out of the Mansion House, Alexander Hale Smith, the third son of Joseph and Emma, used it as a home. It was deeded to him and to David Hyrum Smith. The second son, Frederick, married a Miss Alice Jones. His health was not good and he died in the Mansion House in 1892.

The Mansion House is so closely connected with the history of the Joseph Smith family, so many of them have been born or died in it, that the name of Joseph Smith Mansion by which it is sometimes called is quite correct. David Smith, Joseph's painter-poet son, was born there in October of 1844. David's son Elbert A. (the present Presiding Patriarch of the Reorganized L. D. S. Church and author of "Timbers For the Temple" (novel) was born in Room No. 10 in the hotel part of the Mansion House. Alexander Smith's oldest daughter, Vida E., who wrote our "Young People's History" and the "Old, Old Path" song was born in the same room. Alexander Smith died in the northeast room of the present Mansion while on a visit in Nauvoo in August of 1909. He expressed himself as homesick for Nauvoo and the river all his life

and often expressed the wish that when he came to die it might be in old Nauvoo.

Alexander Smith died in Nauvoo from the time his parents moved there in 1839 till March, 1868. He returned to Nauvoo from Plano in 1870 and remained there making the Mansion House his home until '76, when he moved to Missouri.

While Emma and Mr. Bidamon were still in the Mansion House two of the Smith boys, Alexander and David, set up housekeeping with their brides in the hotel part on the east. This part as will be explained is no longer standing. The deed transferring the property to Alexander Smith and David H. Smith bears the date 1864 and was a new deed, previous papers having been lost in the pioneer upheavals.

Alexander who was in charge of the Mansion House lived in Missouri and Iowa and was much occupied with Church work. He rented the Mansion House to different tenants and to relatives of the Smiths. Several times it stood vacant. It was not easy for Alexander to look after it and the rent was insufficient. As a result the hotel part on the east became so dilapidated that it was necessary to tear it down in 1890. This is the part of the house that was deeded to David H. Smith but in its decayed condition it was pulling down the west portion as well, so permission was secured from the family of David H. Smith for its removal.

The Nauvoo Independent is quoted in The Saints' Herald for August 2, 1890 as follows:

"Workmen are tearing down the east wing of the Mansion House, the home of Joseph Smith. It was erected in 1843. Its condition had

become so dilapidated that its removal was considered expedient. We dislike to have this famous building destroyed. It is one of the first objects visitors seek on their arrival in this historic city. An effort should have been made to preserve it."

Better care was taken of the building from that time on, though we note the Nauvoo Independent later states that the Homestead and Mansion House were in such a condition that saving them would be difficult.

Emma Smith Bidamon died in the Nauvoo House in April of 1879. Five nephews of Joseph Smith and D. D. Babcock of Montrose, Iowa carried her to a grave near Joseph's in the dooryard of the Homestead. Though there were now almost no Latter Day Saints in Nauvoo she was deeply mourned by the community. Young Joseph's Memoirs relate how a stream of Nauvoo people passed by the bier weeping. The Nauvoo Independent of May 9, 1879 gives a long account of her death and funeral, of how she was placed in death in the parlor of the Mansion House and Nauvoo citizens unable to crowd in to hear the funeral sermon stood outdoors and the doors were kept open, so all could hear. Joseph Smith's body also laid in state in the Mansion House, the dining room of the hotel part being used in his case and ten thousand people according to pioneer estimates filing through the room in one day in June of 1844 to see him before his burial.

Alexander Smith had been attending a Church reunion in Bluff Park, near Montrose, Iowa when he died in Nauvoo. He preached four sermons at reunion services with great energy in spite of the August heat and his advancing

age. He then hurried to Nauvoo to visit at the Mansion House. His brother-in-law, John Kendall, was living in the Mansion House then, with his wife and one child. Alexander's wish about dying in the Mansion with the sound of the river in his ears was granted. The room in which he died was the second story room with the so called "secret stairs."

After the passing of this owner his heirs transferred the property to the Reorganized L. D. S. Church. Some steps were taken about 1912 to care for and to restore the home. Opinion expressed in the Nauvoo Independent as late as 1912 favored action to save the Mansion House and to repair it to that end.

It was not till 1918 that a definite Caretaker to entertain visitors was appointed by the Church. The era of hard roads and automobiles brought this development in Church attitude toward historic points. Elder John W. Layton, who was born in Nova Scotia, Canada, came with his wife and daughter, Irene, to live in the Mansion House and to look after Church visitors in Nauvoo. This was the only Latter Day Saints family in Nauvoo at that time, a small group that held a Sunday school in the early 1900s having all moved away by 1900. Mark Seigfreid who taught school and worked in a bank in Nauvoo had charge of this Sunday School work in the early 1900s. The Laytons were listed with the Montrose, Iowa congregation.

The present Reorganized L. D. S. congregation in Nauvoo was established March 19, 1921 and holds services in a schoolhouse purchased from the City of Nauvoo. Elder Layton was Caretaker till 1922 when he turned the work over to an Elder named Amos Berve. Elder Berve acted till 1926 when he

was replaced by Elder Layton who again served till 1926. The work of both of these men in preserving the Mansion and other historic buildings on the Church grounds was definitely constructive. They were aided by wives who were deeply interested. Elder Layton after quitting as Caretaker by reason of age finally bought property in Nauvoo and lived there till his death in 1936.

Elder James C. Page took up duties as Caretaker at the Mansion in 1929. He is a grandson of Apostle John E. Page of the Quorum of the Twelve in the Church in 1840s. Apostle John E. Page was one of the prominent Early Church leaders who refused to have anything to do with Brigham Young and the Utah movement. He remained in Illinois till his death in the early 1860s. His face was turned toward the Reorganized Church, which has repeatedly been found to be the legitimate successor of the Church founded by Joseph Smith in 1830. Elder James C. Page, present Caretaker at the Mansion, also upholds this position. He is ably assisted in his work as Caretaker by a companion who has spent a lifetime in the missionary service of her faith.

For several years past the northwest room in the front of the Mansion House has been given over to relics of pioneer Nauvoo. The Homestead is entirely given over to this purpose. Visitors are welcome and Elder Page is happy to show them the buildings and to answer questions about their history. Twenty-five thousand visitors registered there last year which was the Centennial year of the founding of Nauvoo. So many came that it was necessary to have several assistants associated with

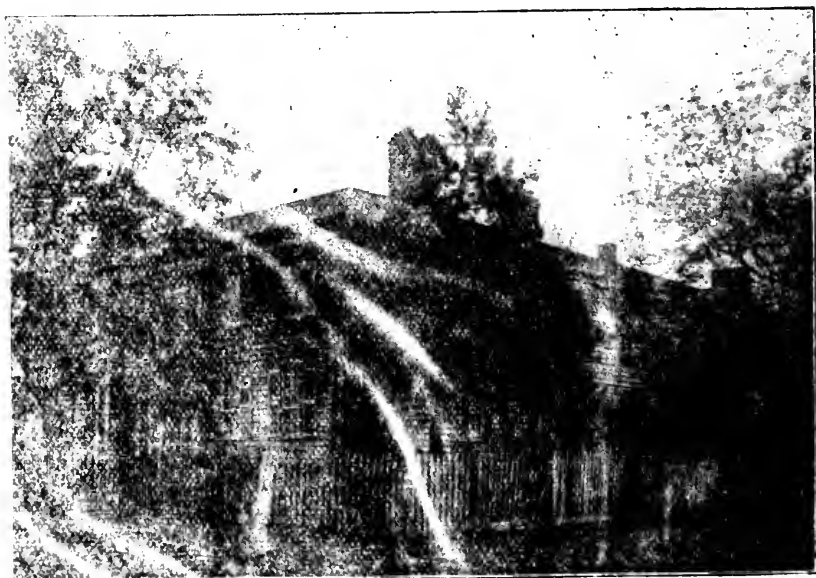
Elder Page. Elder Page married registered one Sunday during the September Grange Festival. Elder J. E. Vanderweil of Independence, Missouri acted as Guide helping Elder Page most of last year, having a room in the Nauvoo House. Warrin I. Van Dine of Burnside was also on duty there considerably and lived in the Nauvoo House most of December. Lynn E. Smith, a great grandson of Joseph Smith (a son of Elbert A. Smith), was added during the summer rush, living on the Temple block.

The future of the Mansion House as one of the historic homes of America seems assured. People of all faiths and all Americans wish it to be preserved so generations to come can walk the floors the Nauvoo pioneers walked. A gracious touch was added when the charm-

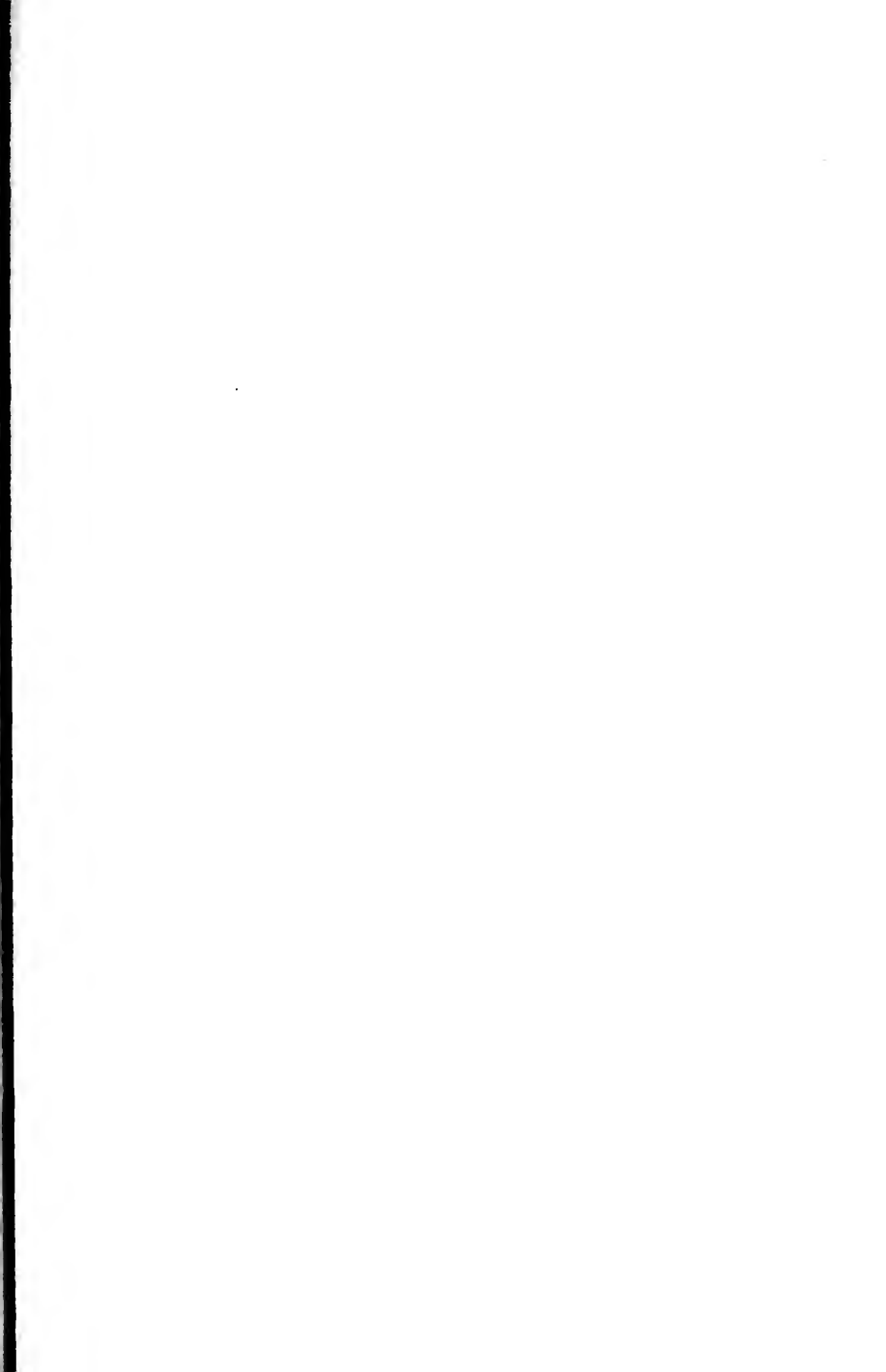
ing first lady of the land stopped at the Mansion House a few moments one October day in the fall of 1938 and signed in the Register where you and I sign. Not to have visited the Mansion House is to have missed something educational and inspirational. Its record is preserved pictorially in many historical journals.

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Editor's Note: Elder S. A. Burgess is Historian of the Reorganized L. D. S. Church. Scholars from all parts consult the records in his office in the Auditorium in Independence, Missouri for authentic material for books on Mormonism. Elder Burgess is the author of the tract "The Early History of Nauvoo" which proved the best selling tract of 1939 at the Mansion House.



THE NAUVOO MANSION—From an old photograph, showing the east wing which was torn down in 1890.







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